

Abstract 363

TITLE: Evaluating Youth Peer Educator

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ISSUE: Peer educator programs train youth to educate their peers and advocate for community change. Our experience demonstrates significant changes within the peer educators themselves, but there are many challenges involved in designing and implementing both process and outcomes-based evaluations.

SETTING: Over the past eight years, staff of The Medical Foundation in Boston has implemented three evaluations of peer education programs in HIV prevention. The programs, have all been between 14 and 19 years of age, representing diverse groups. Once trained, these youth educate same-age and younger youth, social change within their communities.

PROJECT: The first evaluation used clinical interviews to determine the prevalence of three misconceptions among peer educators about HIV/AIDS: 1) the belief that they are vulnerable to contracting the disease; 2) the idea that transmission of HIV occurs through behaviors; and 3) the belief that casual contact with a person with HIV/AIDS is dangerous (resulting in a negative emotional reaction). The second evaluation was a retrospective study that assessed peer educators into three dimensions: 1) increased belief in themselves as agents of change; 2) increased tolerance of diversity; and 3) increased communication and leadership skills. The third evaluation, a prospective outcomes-based assessment, is a new initiative of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and The Medical Foundation. The evaluation was designed to identify key educational factors associated with behavior change among youth peer educators. They were assessed on four dimensions: 1) HIV knowledge; 2) presentation skills; 3) refusal skills; and 4) self-efficacy.

RESULTS: Findings of the first evaluation indicate a noticeable decrease in the numbers of misconceptions held by the peer educators. The second evaluation produced findings indicating promising changes in all three areas, documenting the positive impact of peer educator programs. Preliminary findings of the third evaluation indicate modest improvement between pre- and post-test data.

LESSONS LEARNED: The first two studies, while providing important data, were limited by sample size. In addition, the retrospective study lacked baseline data. The third study involved a larger sample of peer educators and was designed to include peer educator surveys at baseline, before beginning the training program; after completing a short training program; and at the end of the study, after five months of community-based activities. In addition, findings are being compared to survey data from a small control group. It is more thorough study, integrating aspects missing from the earlier studies. This presentation will provide a discussion of the process of implementing an outcomes-based evaluation across multiple community sites, as well as process evaluation of individual sites.

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